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ABSTRACT

A study was made by the Communication Research Center, Florida State University, of Florida's public television audience during the 1974 impeachment proceedings against President Nixon. The results of the study showed that the public television audience of the Judiciary Committee's hearings was small. Other questions studied--attitudes toward telecasts; attitudes toward rebroadcast of the Judiciary Committee meetings on public television; attitudes toward who should pay for congressional telecasts; audience-perceived bias of newspapers, magazines, and television; television's effect on confidence in government--turned up mostly inconclusive evidence due to a large percentage of nonrespondents and a large percentage of "no opinions." The study concluded that the public affairs audience is little studied and little understood. (KKC)

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Public Television and the Judiciary Committee Telecasts*

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When the House Judiciary Committee announced the dates for impeachment proceedings, NPACT and the commercial television networks made preparations to cover the hearings. In the public television circles some anticipation could be noted since the PTV "hit" of the summer of 1973, Watergate hearings, could perhaps be repeated in 1974. However, a difficulty developed.

The Watergate hearings the summer before had been scheduled during the daytime, videotaped and replayed in the evening over public television, attracting a substantial public television audience.

However, a depressing development for public television programmers, no doubt, was the decision of the Judiciary Committee not to telecast the taking of testimony, the hearing of witnesses, and their cross-examination by committee members. So for the early part of the summer, the television pool* waited for the Judiciary Committee to open its meetings for television coverage. Eventually, it

*The television pool was established in much the same pattern as that utilized for the Watergate hearings. When the Judiciary Committee announced that it would allow television coverage of its proceedings, the networks rushed to make ready the equipment for the first session of the hearings. However, the cameras were denied access until the final stages of the hearings. The cost of maintaining the equipment for the month or so before the opening of the debate was, of course, exorbitant. See Broadcasting, July 29, 1974, for a wrap-up of the background of this story.

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was announced that the Committee would televise its debate and vote concerning the writs of impeachment. A number of new developments followed that did not bode well for public television. The principal development was that the Judiciary Committee would hold live evening sessions. Public television faced the possiblity of telecasting live against a commercial network, while the other two networks continued to broadcast their entertainment fare. Also, the Judiciary Committee would hold its regular two daily sessions, as well as the evening session.

NPACT and PBS programmers faced a number of decisions: should the entire day's hearings be taped and replayed in the evening or should the evening hearings be carried live and the daytime events rebroadcast at the end of the live hearings? The latter course was selected, which meant PBS would be carrying live coverage in the evening, along with the appropriate commercial network carrying the identical live coverage, with the remaining commercial networks carrying their regular entertainment program.

Florida PTV Studies

The Communication Research Center at Florida State University has been conducting regular and continuous studies of Florida's seven public television markets for more than two years. When it became evident that public television would again be carrying "open camera" coverage of the House Judiciary Committee meetings, plans were made to study the public television audience as had been done

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earlier for the Watergate hearings.*

A total of 1,707 telephone calls were placed into three of Florida's seven public television markets, with 198 disconnections, 162 illegible respondents (babysitters, foreign speaking), 696 not at home, and 83 unreachable call backs. There were 184 refusals and 384 completions for an adjusted completion rate of 68 percent.**

Findings

Viewing

In Table 1 are the figures for the Florida audience across six days of hearings. In comparison with the long and eventful Watergate hearings, the public television audience of the Judiciary Committee's audience was small. More important, 48 percent of our sample did not watch any of the daily or evening telecasts! Public television held a consistent and modest four percent of the sample. Viewing of the hearings was the highest for the first session, which was telecast in the evening, while for the remaining sessions about a quarter of the sample reports some viewing of the

* Earlier studies from this series are: "Watergate: Who's Watching the Hearings," Public Telecommunication Review (Vol. 1, No. 1, August, 1973); "The Decline of the Watergate Audience," Public Television Review (Vol. 2, No. 1, February 1974); and "Public Television and the Watergate Hearings," Communication Research (Vol. 1, No. 3, Fall, 1974).

**Female interviewers were trained following the procedures developed by the CRC that requires at least two days of study and extensive on-phone practice calling with training questionnaires that were monitered and evaluated with a standardized evaluation form.

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hearings. Naturally, viewing was the highest in the evening rather than during the day.

Table 1

VIEWING OF JUDICIARY COMMITTEE TELECASTS BY DAY AND NETWORK

	Viewing		
Day	Not view	Viewed PTV	Commercial network
1	69%	4	27
2	71%	4	26
3	72%	3	25
4	75%	3	22
5	73%	2	25
6	71%	4	25

Not surprisingly, regular public television viewers (those who view PTV once a week or more) were more likely to be heavy viewers (defined as watching four or more days)of the Judiciary Committee sessions. Yet, the evidence suggests that regular public television viewers were as likely to watch the telecast on a commercial network as on their public television station.

Attitudes Toward Telecasts

First, the respondents were asked whether they approved of the commercial networks telecasting the hearings. Seventy percent replied that they approved of the telecasting while

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18 percent disapproved and 12 percent had no opinion on the subject. Of course, when the amount of viewing of the Judiciary telecasts was considered, those who viewed are more likely to approve telecasting in comparison with the non-viewers (79% of the viewers approved versus 61 percent for the non-viewers).

Further, 76 percent of the regular PTV viewers, in comparison with 65 percent of the non-PTV viewer, were in favor of telecasting the Judiciary Committee proceedings. Consideration of other respondent variables such as occupation, sex, age and income revealed no major differences of opinion concerning the telecasts of the Judiciary Committee. However, whites were 13% more apt to approve of the telecasts than blacks (73 and 60 percent respectively).

The next question dealt with the approval of the rebroadcast of the Judiciary Committee meetings on public television. Surprisingly, the level of approval dropped to 65 percent approving the telecasts on PTV, 23 percent disapproving (a five percent increase in comparison with disapproving of the commercial networks telecasting the impeachment proceedings). However, a majority of those disapproving of the rebroadcast on PTV are <u>not</u> regular viewers of public television! Last, those with higher education, namely college graduates and above, are more likely to be in favor of rebroadcasting by public television of the judiciary proceedings.

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The following question dealt with who should pay for such congressional telecasts, the government, the networks or some other alternative? The findings suggest some confusion over the idea in our sample; for example, 24 percent have no opinion about who should pay for such programs. In addition, 35% say the government should pay while an approximate number say the networks should pay (31 percent). Surprisingly, heavy and light non-viewers of the hearings did not differ significantly in who should pay for the telecasts. The generalization does not hold for the regular public television viewers in comparison with non-viewers considering who should pay for the telecasts.

Table 2

RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION:
Should Public Television Rebroadcast
the Judiciary Hearings?

	Weekly Ptv Viewer	Light PTV Viewer	Voluntary* Non-PTV Viewer	Non-voluntary** PTV Viewer
Disapprove	18%	21%	30%	25%
Approve	77	75	58	53
No opinion	5	2	9	14
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
N= ( )	(36)	(47)	(69)	(124)

* The voluntary non-viewer is one who can receive the station and chooses not to view.
**The non-voluntary public television viewer is an individual who cannot receive the local public television station.

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Perceived Bias

A popular pastime in the Nixon administration was to accuse the news media of being biased toward certain points of view. To ascertain if their was any spill-over of distrust in the direction of public television, a number of questions were asked dealing with particular types of media and their treatment of then President Nixon. Specifically the question read: "In your personal opinion, have any of the following news sources displayed bias in their coverage of the President?" This was followed by naming four media dealing coverage of the President, local newspapers, network evening newscasts, weekly newsmagazines and public/educational television. In Table 3 are the percents of the people who said each medium was indeed biased in its coverage of the President.

The findings suggest in a tentative way that public television has escaped fairly well the taint of bias directed toward the other media. It is puzzeling, however, to note that it is the light, or irregular viewer of public television who gives public television its highest bias rating.

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Table 3

PERCENT OF SAMPLE
SAYING A SPECIFIC MEDIUM IS BIASED
IN ITS COVERAGE OF PRESIDENT NIXON

	Weekly PTV Viewer	Light PTV Viewer	Voluntary Non-PTV Viewer	Non-voluntary Non PTV Viewer
Newspapers are biased	34% *	36%	37%	33%
Network news-casts biased	43%	40%	32%	32%
Weekly news magazines biased	26%	26%	17%	18%
Public TV biased	12%	21%	12%	7%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
N= ( )	(36)	(47)	(69)	(124)

*Percent is of those people who answered yes to the question

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Confidence

It is often suggested that telecasting the various Congressional hearings and proceedings strengthens the fibers of democracy. The ability to see one's elected officials in action and engaged in managing the governmental processes supposedly strengthens one's positive attitude toward the American political process.

Each respondent was asked to agree or disagree with the following statement: "Televising of Congressional hearings such as the Watergate, increases one's confidence in government." Regular public television viewers were more likely to agree with the statement than light or non-public television viewers. Specifically, 53 percent of the regular PTV viewers agreed with the statement, while 43 percent of the light PTV viewers agreed,while 44 percent of the non-viewers agreed. Even more striking is the expected finding that viewers of the Judiciary proceedings are more likely to agree with this statement. In particular, 41 percent non-Judiciary viewers agree with the statement, 40 percent of the light viewers of the Judiciary hearings agreed and 66 percent of the heavy viewers of the Judiciary committee agree with the statement.

In sum then, non-viewers of either public television or the Judiciary committee proceedings are less inclined to support the statement. Public television viewers and Judiciary proceeding viewers support the statement. In a sense it would seem (to paraphrase a cliche) one is preaching to the converted. Namely, those most likely to have high degrees

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of political efficancy are more likely to be viewing the appropriate television programs, than the converse.

Conclusions

In retrospect it is difficult to judge the impact, if any, of public television's coverage of the Judiciary Committee. If one were to use the Watergate hearings of the summer of 1973 as a baseline, then the current set of proceedings are but dim reflections in terms of popularity. The wisdom of public television competing for the audience of the Judiciary Committee in prime time is clearly in order. We have some evidence to show that public television, when confronted with head-on commercial competition of the same event, does not do very well. For example, in New York it was usual for the commercial network to have a 20 share for its Judiciary Proceedings while WNET had a 2 or 1 share. The ratings for the video tape delays usually telecast at the end of the live evening session had an audience beneath reportable standards.

Perhaps then it is unfair to compare the Judiciary telecasts with PTV's Watergate audience. There is little doubt that the public had tired of the Watergate affair, especially the media coverage of the multi-faceted event. By the time of the "dirty tricks" phase of the Watergate hearings the audience had dwindled, especially for public television. Unlike football, the viewing public was perhaps too disinterested in the final game of the series dealing with the Watergate coverup and related capers. Besides,

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it was quite obvious who "lost."

The large and unwieldy Judiciary Committee made for difficult TV coverage by the media for three reasons. First, there was no adversary or hostile witnesses to banter with, and second, the cast of Representatives was too large and varied for easy viewer identification (and no doubt stereotyping). Third, the session scheduling of the Judiciary Committee sessions worked against public television's "Watergate format." Warergate attracted its audience in the evening because those who worked could not devote attention to the day's hearings. During the Judiciary meetings, the evening sessions were live, usurping the telecast of the day's video tape of daily events. The old viewing habits established during the Watergate hearings could not be re-established and utilized by public television. Certainly it is possible if the sessions had been of longer duration than its present six day stint, a new format could have evolved to serve public television's needs.

In summary then, the Judiciary Committee's televised sessions held little in the way of an audience attraction for public TV. Given the lateness with which the tapes began to be telecast (always after 11:00Eastern time) no doubt resulted in restricted station clearance for PBS, which in turn reduced the audience size. In an ironic, yet sad, way the very popularity of the telecasts reflected that of then President Nixon. Still, the presence of the televising of the sessions increased HUTS, as did Watergate. The special type of viewer attracted by such television coverage of live com-

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mittee hearings deserves further study. It is quite clear that the viewer of this type of public affairs programming differs from the lover of music and drama (there is little overlap between these specific PTV audiences). For example, in earlier studies we established that Watergate attracted two viewers for every lover of the arts it drove away. It is curious that this public affairs audience is so little studied and understood. Further, it is a potential audience that public television has yet to make any protracted effort to attract and hold in its "stable of segmented audiences." One possibility of exploring this avenue of programming is to watch for the development of television coverage of the live legislative sessions, especially Congress. This new type of coverage may prove to be an interesting addition to public television's repertoire of programs.